

A Power to Translate the World: New Essays on Emerson & International Culture, ed. David LaRocca and Ricardo Miguel-Alfonso (Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2015), 354 pp.

Reviewed by **Christopher Hanlon**, Arizona State University

Emerson seems always to present such opportunity for transnational rumination, his early call for “the gradual domestication of the idea of Culture” notwithstanding. As an addition to the many scholarly books focused on Emerson’s transnationalism, David LaRocca’s and Ricardo Miguel-Alfonso’s collection *A Power to Translate the World* stages a timely, provocative conversation seeking further to characterize Emerson’s bearing toward the world beyond the US. Even so, taking as their eponym a quotation from Emerson’s 1841 lecture “The Method of Nature” (“Each individual soul is such, in virtue of its being a power to translate the world into some particular language of its own”), LaRocca and Miguel-Alfonso describe the volume’s undertaking in ways that might make Emerson himself seem incidental. How, they ask, does the translation of the foreign into “some particular language of [one’s] own” culminate in transnational experience? They could as easily ask the question of US writers who had spent far more time abroad than Emerson, like Hawthorne, or whose linguistic facility permitted less reliance upon English translations of world literature, like Fuller.

Yet Emerson has for so long drawn special attention, among all of his generation of writers, for his cosmopolitanism. It’s a theme that runs from Oliver Wendell Holmes, who recalled in his 1885 biography that “Emerson was fascinated by the charm of English society, [and] filled with admiration of the people,” to a current field of scholars who have produced a detailed account of Emerson’s globalist disposition: Leslie Eckel argues that Emerson’s transnational impulses subsume his nationalist ones; Lawrence Buell reads Emerson through his dialogues with Matthew Arnold, Samuel Coleridge, and Goethe; other such readers include Samantha Harvey, David Greenham, Marek Paryz, and Andrew Taylor. Still it bears pointing out that within this plethora of work situating Emerson as a figure of international stature whose influence therefore spans the globe, certain precincts have remained dominant. Having unfolded not simply during but as a result of the transatlantic turn in US literary historiography whose self-conscious Robert Weisbuch explored, Emerson’s stature and circulation within a North Atlantic, English-speaking literary culture and marketplace has dominated the scholarship.

Indeed, much of *A Power to Translate the World* heightens our sense for Emerson’s Anglo-American affiliations. Len Gougeon, for instance, addresses Emerson’s profound respect for the Chartist movement during his second trip to England in 1847-48,

showing how that esteem not only dovetailed with his longstanding convictions on the dignity of work, but also helped to shape his abolitionism as a transnational effort to elevate workers—enslaved or not—and thus broaden the franchise. In her contribution, K. L. Evans finds in Matthew Arnold's admiration for Emerson's critical powers the occasion to reevaluate Arnold's reputation for having conceived of criticism as a vehicle for cultural conservatism. An essay by Daniel Rosenberg Nutters takes its provocation from Henry James's condescending assessment, borne out in multiple statements, that Emerson was an instance of a naïve, sanguine idealism, a typical American abroad who was constitutionally unfit to engage Europe with its dark complexities, let alone maneuver within its spaces of intrigue. (As Nutters says in his own way, it's a projection unto Emerson that makes him sound like Daisy Miller or Isabel Archer.)

These essays add to our understanding of Emerson and his afterlife, and they demonstrate there is much yet to learn about his relationship with England, but they accrue still more value by broadening the cartography of Emerson studies to such an extent. Emerson's engagement with India, for example, has formed a node in the field since Kenneth Cameron's important 1977 essay on the subject. David M. Robinson's approach—by way of *Bramo Samaj*, the monotheistic rendition of Hinduism that engrossed Mary Moody Emerson before captivating Emerson himself along with others of the Boston intelligentsia—reveals that Emerson's interest was part of a larger phenomenon that prepared the way, ultimately, for Ghandi's reception in the US. Other vignettes uncover still less-traveled terrain, like Robert D. Habich's examination of Emerson's voyage through Italy during his first trip abroad in 1832. Habich deploys "tourism theory" in order to identify Emerson's initial responses to Europe (far less self-contained and serene, it turns out, than his later remarks on tourism in "Self-Reliance" might imply). In his intriguing contribution on Emerson and Japan, Naoko Saito describes Emerson's embrace by Tokoko Kitimura during the period of Japan's modernization near the end of the nineteenth century. At that moment Emerson represented for Kitimura the opening of an inward freedom, a spiritual life partitioned from the political, but Saito's essay calls for reexamining this now-traditionally Japanese understanding of Emerson, whom Saito sees as a philosopher of traversal from the "inmost" to the "outmost," a philosopher of action utterly germane to the post-Fukushima era of Japanese soul-searching amid democratic dissension.

Still other chapters map out Emerson's resonance in China (Neil Dolan, Laura Jane Wey, and Mathew Foust); within and in response to Germany (Richard Deming and Monika Elbert); in Latin American poetics (Ricardo Miguel-Alfonso); within and vis-à-vis Judaism: Kenneth Sacks, who interrogates the longstanding assessment that Emerson remained throughout his life a classic Brahmin anti-Semite; and David Mikics, who surveys a series of Jewish readers of Emerson including Saul Bellow, Alfred Kazin,

Stanley Cavell, and Harold Bloom. For Mikics, such Jewish respondents to Emerson have found in him varying levels of rhyming with Hebrew thought; they thus transmit him back to a larger academic and literary culture through the conduit of Jewish intellectual traditions. Mikics' style of reading Emerson exemplifies what makes *A Power to Translate the World* so interestingly calibrated with a current sense for Emerson—as Branka Arsić has put it, for instance—as a philosopher of apostasy, departure, leaving. Indeed, in their Introduction, LaRocca and Miguel-Alfonso pivot from Cavell's influential reading of Emerson's passage through Nietzsche to hypothesize that the US might be at its most approachable via the long career of its reception elsewhere. "In short," they write, "the term 'national' suggests that we are not to be so sure that something—a thought, a theory, a picture of reality—is 'ours' after all" (17).

Perhaps it will do to elaborate one impression with which I am left by way of Donald Pease's particularly bold contribution. Emersonian self-reliance, Pease points out, describes the act of occupying a position extrinsic to structuring antinomies—and the example par excellence is Emerson's depiction of Toussaint L'Ouverture, among the other Haitian revolutionaries he praises in his 1844 Emancipation Day address. In a maneuver that flouts the historicist critical protocols that have dominated so much of Americanist scholarship for so long, Pease then turns his exegesis to President Obama, who for him most aptly incarnates that extrinsic and Emersonian subjectivity. Directed by Obama's recognition of the oppositions that have for centuries structured US white supremacy (and about which Obama writes in *Dreams From My Father* [2004]), the presidential campaign of 2008 constituted for Pease a performative expression that was both produced by and unsettling to the antagonisms his political opponents attempted to unleash upon him: the polarity of the slave or the insurrectionist, or, as Pease prefers, the black messiah versus the black terrorist. Rather than excoriating that antinomy, Obama's response was to recognize it as the core fantasy of US political and social life, an impasse whose subversion his candidacy and only his candidacy held the potential to accomplish, to "make a way out of no way," as Obama put it in his Philadelphia Address.

Pease's approach responds to the question of why Emerson, among all his contemporaries, should continue to provoke such extensive considerations over transnational experience. For Emerson's identification of the impossible desire of L'Ouverture and "the Haytian heroes" to have provided the template by which the US electorate could be moved to overcome the given order of possibility in 2008 is truly to consider the extent to which the intra- and international subsist in ongoing dialectical and generative tension. Pease rightly considers his treatment of Emerson and Obama as a rejoinder to assessments of the former that divorce his transcendentalism from his

politics. It is also a reminder that both sides of that last opposition, such as they are and as they continue to evolve, are essentially uncontainable within national parameters of intellectual genealogy and influence.